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27 May 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR: Inspector General, Central Intelligence Agency  
SUBJECT : Complaints About Research on the Viet Cong

1. Please accept my apologies for the delay in forwarding this memorandum, which I promised to send you after our conversation of 3 April 1968.
2. The conversation persuaded me that I had both immediate and basic complaints. The latter call into question the overall conduct of intelligence research on the Vietnam war.

Pressing Complaints

3. The immediate grievances concern the state of research on the Viet Cong infrastructure, generally regarded as the most important part of the Communist apparatus in South Vietnam. The Deputy Directorate of Intelligence (DDI) has yet to assign anyone full time to conduct systematic research on the infrastructure. Although some research is being done in Saigon on the infrastructure, by MACV, ICPM, and the CIA Station, it is largely uncoordinated and, in the case of the MACV Political Order of Battle component, principally directed at collecting names.

4. As a result, the CIA is incapable of discussing intelligently several topics of current importance. Since no coherent research has been done on the large and well-organized Viet Cong Military Proselyting apparatus, for example, we are unable to inform policymakers on the extent to which enemy proselyters have been able to cause or take advantage of democratization in the South Vietnamese Army, which in some areas seems to be dangerously weak. Nor, for the same reason, can we discuss in detail the operations of the Viet Cong Political Struggle organization as it attempts to sow discord in the society and government of South Vietnam.

*In fact, we believe that a large-scale effort is underway, but this does not provide a measure of results*

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5. I recommend that the DDI assign at once several--say, half a dozen--full time analysts to investigate systematically and in detail the organization and methods of operation of the Communist infrastructure. Such research should be done in cooperation with the field and with the DDP, under the direction of a person with a working knowledge of the infrastructure.

Basic Complaints

6. The present failings of intelligence research stem from longstanding mismanagement. I level four basic charges. There has been:

First, a misuse of research manpower,

Second, a misdirection of research effort,

Third, a want of courage in advancing well-documented findings concerning Viet Cong manpower,

and

Fourth, a lethargy in correcting past failures.

Charge One

7. The CIA has been inept in its allocation of research manpower. The DDI did not assign a full-time researcher to work on our southern adversaries until late 1966, about a year and a half after our massive military intervention in the South. "Task forces" formed and dissolved, individual analysts studied the southern enemy sporadically, but the detailed research necessary for coherent intelligence was not done because virtually no one was assigned to do it. A study group to conduct basic research on the Viet Cong was not formed until August 1967.

8. Explanations advanced to excuse the phenomenon are inadequate. One excuse, that there was a "lack of manpower" to do detailed research, is absurd. A second excuse, that the DDI Collation Branch (now called the Research and Analysis Branch) in Saigon was designed to do

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in-depth research on the enemy, was undercut by the statements of a high-level DDI official last summer, who said that Branch's purpose was a) to provide a training ground for future DDI analysts, and b) to "support the Station." Until late 1967, the Branch received almost no direction or communications from headquarters.

Charge Two

9. The misdirection of research effort has taken at least three forms:

- a. A relative neglect of research on the Viet Cong political apparatus.
- b. An underemphasis of basic research on the enemy.
- c. A relative neglect, until very recently, of primary sources on the enemy, such as captured documents, POW reports, and [redacted] interviews.

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10. Although it is commonly said that the war in Vietnam is "political," the civilian research community, in studying the enemy, has devoted most of its energies to reporting the operations of his army, while largely neglecting his political apparatus. The DDC, for example, has written only one detailed memorandum on the infrastructure,\* leaving to MACV the production of the best single work on Communism organization.\*\* The neglect of political intelligence on the southern enemy has resulted in an all-too-frequent misunderstanding at higher levels of the nature of the war. The misunderstanding is usually coupled with a dismay that we seem to be losing a struggle in which our military forces are demonstrably superior to those of the enemy.

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11. Part of the reason for the neglect of the enemy's political apparatus has been an underemphasis of basic research, which might have demonstrated political organization's importance. Until very recently, most of our intelligence production on the enemy in the south was oriented towards "current intelligence," or in responding to short-term requests. Basic research on the enemy's organization, manpower and dynamics was left to such organizations as MACV [redacted]. Such deferrals of responsibility seem inexcusable, since it has been clear for some time that MACV's reporting has left much to be desired. For example, its Order of Battle carried the number of Viet Cong irregulars at exactly 103,573 between late 1964 and May 1966, and the number of "political cadres" at precisely 39,175 from late 1964 until well into 1967.

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12. The dearth of basic research has had a number of unfortunate consequences. By far the worst was that the intelligence community vastly underestimated the strength of the enemy and therefore the scale of the Vietnamese war. It was not discovered until late 1966, for example, after a most cursory examination of the evidence, that we had underestimated the number of organized Viet Cong by close to 100%. Likewise, we did not find out until late 1967 and early 1968 that estimates of recruiting and infiltration were probably far too low. A second consequence was that CIA attempts to penetrate the infrastructure have met with scant success, in part because we knew so little about what we were operating against.\*

13. A corollary of the neglect of basic research has been--until very recently--a relative inattention to captured documents, POW reports and [redacted] interviews. Although

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\* To put this consequence in perspective, it should be noted that an ignorance of the target organization is only one of the reasons for the overall failure of CIA espionage operations in Vietnam. Another more obvious cause, not specifically related to the problem of intelligence research discussed in this paper, has been that the number of Agency case officers in the field who could speak Vietnamese has always been considerably less than half a dozen.

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several offices "scanned" the documents, none assigned analysts to read them full-time until the middle of 1967. Since it takes several months to build up enough experience to read captured documents properly, coherent intelligence based on primary sources has only just begun to flow.

Charge Three

14. When the CIA (or specifically, the DDI) discovered in late 1966 that the evidence strongly suggested the size of the enemy forces in South Vietnam had been badly underestimated, its apparent reaction was to sweep the discovery under the rug. The want of mettle continued until at least 30 January 1968, the day the Tet offensive began.

15. Its reaction in the latter half of 1966 to a series of memoranda concerning Viet Cong manpower--a subject on which I have specialized since early 1966--was highly unusual. For example:

a. A draft memorandum written on 21 August suggesting that MACV was underestimating the strength of the Viet Cong irregulars by at least 100% was returned to me with virtually no comment. A second, unrequested, version of the memorandum was finally published on 8 September 1966 in limited edition as a "draft working paper." I doubt that it would have been issued even in this form had I not insisted at length, and in the face of what seemed to me considerable reluctance on the part of the DDI front offices.

b. A draft memorandum of early December 1966 suggesting that MACV had underestimated the number of Communist service troops in South Vietnam by over 500% was returned to me with no indication that MACV had been told of a possible discrepancy. I doubt that MACV would have been so informed had I not insisted in mid-December that a cable be sent to [redacted]

[redacted] Saigon requesting that he tell MACV about the questions the memorandum raised. (The cable also questioned the accuracy of MACV estimates of the number of "political cadres.")

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c. A memorandum written in the fourth quarter of 1966 concerning Viet Cong irregulars suggesting that their strength was "250,000-300,000 or more" (instead of the 112,760 then carried in MACV's Order of Battle) was killed by the DDI in February 1967 for the stated reason that MACV was about to publish a new set of irregular figures. MACV did not do so until October. The memorandum--some 60 pages long, with over 80 footnotes, most referring to captured documents--is still the most comprehensive single work written on Viet Cong irregulars.

16. The timidity continued throughout 1967. For example, strength estimates contained in various drafts of National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-67 (concerning the Viet Cong's ability to continue) were progressively lowered from the Estimate's first draft of 14 June 1967 until it was finally published in November. (See comments on the last draft, attached.) The final version followed "agreements" in Saigon in September between CIA, DIA and MACV, concerning enemy strength figures. The "agreements" primarily consisted of a series of capitulations by CIA representatives to MACV.

17. There have been some exceptions to the overall pattern. In January 1967, for example, the Board of National Estimates indicated in a memorandum that the size of the Viet Cong irregular forces was larger than had been hitherto estimated; and in May 1967, the CIA published a limited-distribution memorandum which estimated the overall numbers of Viet Cong at some 500,000. Neither exception directly challenged MACV figures, however. When a direct confrontation occurred in September 1967, CIA retreated.

18. Since 30 January 1968, the day the enemy Tet offensive began, the CIA has apparently determined to confront MACV on strength estimates. The show of pluck, it appears to me, came too late.

Charge Four

19. Although some of the deficiencies noted in the previous paragraphs have been partially righted, the pace of reform has been glacial.

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20. Production elements of the DDCI have been lethargic in assigning full-time analysts to work on the southern Viet Cong:

- a. The Office of Research and Reports did not do so until September 1966. The assigned analyst worked with only minimal direction until August 1967, when a South Vietnam Branch was created under the newly-organized Office of Economic Research. The branch chief, although competent, had no experience working on the Viet Cong.
- b. The Office of Current Intelligence had no one studying the Viet Cong full-time until December 1967. The person then assigned, although competent, had had no previous experience working on Vietnam. Until then, OCI's Indo-China Division--several of whose analysts had worked on occasion on the Viet Cong--was not organized in such a way as to allow for systematic study of the enemy in the South.
- c. The Office of Strategic Research, by charter, does not work on the Vietnam problem.

21. The lethargy occurred despite frequent prodding. For example:

- a. In mid-January 1967, the Staff for the Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs (SAVA) sent a memorandum to the DDCI recommending that the DDCI conduct research with all "deliberate speed" on the neglected portions of the CB. The DDCI did not begin such research until December 1967.
- b. In May 1967, a draft memorandum written in SAVA pointed out that the CIA paid insufficient attention to captured documents. The memorandum received virtually no distribution, and systematic exploitation of the documents did not begin until late 1967.

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c. In August 1967, a draft memorandum written in SAVA recommended the formation of a Viet Cong research group to study the enemy's infrastructure. As yet, no such group has been formed, and DDCI study on the infrastructure is at a virtual standstill.

General Comments

22. History will probably record that one of the principle reasons the United States became mired in the Vietnam war was a failure in intelligence. We did not realize what we were getting into, did not know what we were looking at when we got there, and are only now discovering the consequences of our ignorance and myopia. Certain medium and low-level intelligence officials familiar with Vietnam warned what might happen, but their warnings were too often disregarded, or drowned in the babble of the uninformed.

23. Once the US was heavily involved in Vietnam--one might remember that over 10,000 American soldiers were there in 1962--the lack of foresight in developing a coherent body of research on the southern enemy became inexcusable. In failing to do its homework, the research community has allowed its country, with inadequate warning, to sink deeper and deeper into the Vietnamese mire, with increasingly little hope of honorable extrication. The disservice came about because of sloth, timidity, and bad scholarship.

Specific Requests

24. In view of the gravity of the charges, and my desire to get them aired, I respectfully submit four specific requests:

a. That the Inspectorate General take steps to initiate a thorough investigation of the charges to determine their merit, and that I be apprised, in writing, of progress towards this end.

b. That copies of this memorandum be forwarded to appropriate members of the White House Staff, and to the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, and that I be informed, in writing, when this is done.

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c. That copies of this memorandum be forwarded to the Office of the Director and to the Office of the Deputy Director of Intelligence, and that I be informed, in writing, when this is done.

d. That the Inspector General provide me with a modest amount of safe-space for the safekeeping of relevant memoranda which have been collected over the past two years.

25. I would hope that any investigation would result in recommendations on how to prevent a repetition of circumstances that prompted this memorandum.

26. I respectfully await your reply.



Samuel A. Adams  
OHS/E/SV  
Extension

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Attachment

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